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## my brother

Dan Paul Rose  
*Iowa State University*

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my brother

by

Dan Paul Rose

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:  
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Iowa State University

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2003

Graduate College  
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Dan Paul Rose

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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## THE TRAMP (I)

The bunk beds of youth. Inside Ward 9. Were hard. White. Cold. Jackie. My topmate. Prayed to God above. I whispered in unison below. Hoping it went somewhere. Someone was listening. But no one ever answered. I knew then. I would have to go find it.

I hit the streets of my little town. I found them lifeless. Boring. I walked right out. Never to return.

The country was open. Clean. Brown. Ditches were damp. Lush with head-high timothy grass. Not the best combination for sleeping. Nonetheless. As I lay there. I found solace in constellations I could not name. My friends. Apollo's arrow is clear. The universe is a miracle. It must expand.

As I reached those many odd shelters. The food was sticky. Bland. Nearly colorless. Sugar and salt were once the apples of a pirate's eye. Now I know why. Making oatmeal and corn casseroles. Off a shiny tin tray. Something I could stomach.

The cots were creaky. And so close together. Who likes a wool blanket on bare skin anyway? Grown men who have pissed their pants? Talk your ears off? Ask if I could really read. *Can you really read boy? What's it like? Do letters dance for you? Is that James Joyce dead or alive?* I don't know. I responded. Under poor light. Inside a Lutheran rec center. I wasn't afraid to die. I just sat there and tried not to smell. That odor. It wasn't that I was going to cry. From fumes. From fantasy. From the smell of piss.

I soon used my thumb. *Go straight south young man.* The sturdy farmer advised. *Iowa winds in December can kill'ya. I'd get on the road now.* He pointed a thick finger. *It's that away.*

Down to Kansas. Across Oklahoma. Into Santa Fe. I stopped and finally breathed. Can I suck it thru my nose now? Is the coast clear? I would have to wait & see.

The lower Rockies were massive. Blue. I stood on highway 7. In a narrow valley. At 5 AM. Shivering. The pint of whiskey only made me giddy. The joint made me dreamy and dumb. I was looking for real Indians. Where have I come to? I felt dizzy. There was no traffic. I buried my thumb. All I could do was keep walking. I told Jackie.

When I snuck out of The Home For Boys. *Really. I'm not on the run. Really.* To this day. I wonder if Jackie believes me. For real.

It's not so bad. Not having a home. Changing your name everyday with a straight face. Telling cute. Gum popping waitresses. With shiny crosses between their breasts. *I believe in everything. Nothing is for losers. And all imaginable is the sum total of one. Like one round planet. One perfect peach.* I was in search of that response. That one voice that spoke back.

It's okay to tell a lie. I suppose. Because you have no name. Only a drifter's face. Remember. Star fields collide in outer space.

*Don't look up.* But I had to. I wanted to go west. And warm. Phoenix would suffice. The name was Greek. The earth was red. A bird erupted from ashes. That's all made up. That's okay. So am I.

I said *hello* to Travis. He pulled to the shoulder. His dog. I named Willy. And his black Ford pickup. Tipped his 10-gallon lid. *Howdy.* Didn't say another word. Willy sitting middle. Licked my rosy cheek. Sun on my face at 5 PM. We must be going toward the desert. I was sure we were heading west. I was happy not to talk. I was listening. To the wind. Thru the window. I was fixated. On the road ahead.

Did I mention poor people pick up hitchhikers? Rich people have no time. I guess. For free rides. I wonder what it's like to be scared. Of people. Or dark ideas. I thank God for not making me suspicious. Let alone a rich guy with no time. For people. Let alone. Dark ideas.

I smiled. Put my hand to my mouth. Starting to giggle. That old mangy cur was beginning to nibble.

## A STALKER CHANGED HIS SCENE

Sinead's Sam Scotch English Irish  
 Her son her father her brother  
 Her pale blue lover

These faces came to mind  
 As I watched her stroll toward that favorite corner market

Fruit-full in the front wicker bins  
 Green awnings shading a pink Indian summer  
 I've been here before

A sort of specialty shop: chocolates, teas, ribbons, sweet cakes  
 I see the jolly, bald, apron'd, fat man greet her now

He gives her a rub  
 She turns around

I'm not sure if she sees me  
 But I duck behind the black British taxi

She looks closer sensing a stare  
 I back away

I walk fast  
 So I never see her enter the fat man's specialty shop  
 Where she would smell that mango  
 Brush the shoulder of her creamy white blouse  
 Glance at her silver watch  
 But this no time for her to catch on

To where I walked  
 Was thru the green pitch  
 Where I rendezvoused with Machine Gun Bill  
 Bill Vollmann the bitch

We proceeded to tilt some steel  
 I mean drink some ale  
 Forget our cares  
 Down at the old timers' pub  
*The Changing Dragon*  
 Off the dock, Greenwich Park

## FORT SHERIDAN

The jungle at dawn  
Rainy, misty, May, no memories

I think of nothing but the shadows  
No reason to determine a past

We move on the creaky train  
Becoming fixated on rusty lights  
Through the not too distant fog  
Between the green trees, green air  
North of Chalippi

I halt briefly  
Swallow my black-juice  
Looking again thinking they're gone

They are not  
They are still  
They are not fading  
The trees are still

No wind pushes leaves  
The foreign flags  
Both yellow and blue  
Flapless  
It is still

I wonder  
Will I see this light again?  
Beams that offer solitude company?  
How amber blazes through green fog?  
How I witnessed Fort Sheridan?



## PATIO BAR

A woman smokes. I believe it's French. A filterless cigarette. He may be eating roast beef. The man she's with. He speaks French. My glasses are off. It could be goulash or meatloaf. The waitress stops. Friendliness. I am D. Paul Clay sitting and wondering behind a black cap in Napa where it's sunny with German beer to cool. It's too early to drink the wines of the valley. As the French continues with her heavy smoke drifting over. My direction. Boy they talk fast. Now they know I'm observing them. Flick the green gator on my sport shirt. A distraction. She orders coffee. A word the same in English with a less pretty accent. *Kaw-fay?* Wouldn't you agree about the accent? There's a pause. No one talks. I start to think a young French girl might like the way a public schoolboy from London might talk. Better than the way she talks. It's modern. We get bored easily. The little French girl wants a change. She wants to move. She wants to revolve. Television shows her the whole thing. Switch the channel. Montreal. Again. Nepal. Again. Tel Aviv. Again. Dublin. Again. New York. You can't blame her. Yet. In the end. If you ask her. What she would die for. I bet she would take the French. If you couldn't change. But you can. Turn your head back on the woman who smokes. She wonders where I was. Since I wasn't looking at her. And her man. Won't ever know I was picturing an English lad talking so proper. You'd think he had a mouthful of marbles. I now gain sight in surrendering the unseen. Children cross the street in front of me. You too don't like the metaphysics? Don't let the cat out of the bag? Don't let the blind lead the blind? That's what I overheard. They go when the light says *walk*. The square-white-box lights up. I smile as they laugh. Four cute kids. One who carries a red dragon kite with a long black tail. It's a clean California street. You know. The kind in magazines. Shiny. It's almost too good to be true. How the French woman offers me a cigarette as I follow the black tail. Trailing from her hand. Startled. I accept. *Thank you*. It was a gesture of *hello* without my asking. It also got my attention. I will now smoke this thing. I don't smoke though. I will now. To be polite. Or stupid. Nonetheless. I can't both write. And smoke. At the same time. I must make a choice. Like the little French girl when put to the test. But don't get me wrong. I like the English too. Excuse me. Do you like it all?

That cigarette was awful. Awfully strong. It was a mistake. The only thing it provided was a small break. Two short spaces signifying a lapse. When I did that thing. To be polite. I'm not very smart. Trying to be nice. But that is all. Since my friend has returned from re-parking the van. Because of a two hour limit. Plus. That nice lady. And her man. Who was thirty years older than she. I bet. Are now gone. And I know one thing. It isn't polite to write. While your friend is here. Only wanting to relax. And exchange. A few ordinary words. Every now and then. *Hey Chuck. Everything okay?*

## POSTMORTEM FINDS

I realized the man in the green tie  
Was the man my mother loved

Funny she never gave indication  
Let alone had an affair for thirteen years

It seemed unreal  
She never said word one  
Before dying afloat

It was true I never knew my mother  
Or Mr. Cheater in the green tie

I trusted someone so long for nothing  
I felt like dog kicked in side

We thought she was in the choir  
But she wasn't singing  
It was Sundays at the Kennedy Hotel  
Not "Praise the Lord" at St. James Church

As for my dad  
I guess he didn't give a damn  
Maybe he didn't even know  
I can't ask him now

In the end there was nothing left of him  
His lawyer asked me if he had cancer  
He was worn to the bone by sixty  
Brother Richard said he became anorexic  
Jessica couldn't stop shedding her tears  
He was a wasted toothpick

Thirty-seven letters placed neatly in a box  
Bound by a red ribbon inside our old attic home  
Sweet little letters from Mr. Green Tie

What struck me as I read them  
Sitting atop an old crate under bright light  
Was how she loved his boat  
His fifty-foot cabin cruiser named *Gloria*

My mom cared about a boat?

## MY BROTHER

Born headstrong & healthy  
Fair-haired & clear eyed

Could climb to a pine tree's top like a cat  
Only spitting on me  
Always afraid to handle higher branches

But he never did hit  
Just joked from fifteen feet above  
Shifting his head at the last second  
Saliva stringing down  
Laughing lightly  
*Come higher, brother! There's an opening!*

He just joked about it  
He was a good guy  
Gay and sanguine  
He liked his brother

Never had any doubts either  
Never questioned  
Or so it seemed  
And more triples than me  
Seeing his speed around second was equal to mine  
His Pete Rose slide far better  
Lifting dust at third  
*Safe!* Sounds the umpire

I shouldn't deny his other strengths  
A top student  
The kind you say  
*Doesn't have to try*  
He could fly  
His scores on universal tests soared ninety-nine

The night before the exam  
When I was sound asleep by ten  
He was up till two a.m. watching a Bogart film

I don't know how he did it  
But he did  
And without much effort

That's what made me jealous  
The lack of effort

Then he would tell me about *Casablanca*  
That following morning  
In a sharp & lucid sequence

Who is this guy?  
Wasn't I the storyteller?

I wasn't  
It was a joke  
It is a joke  
The joke is on you know who  
And I'll forever hear him  
Say that again

When I was ten  
He held a special meeting inside my sister's room  
Unlike the boys  
Forced to share  
She claimed her own space

It was a private space he found  
So I knew the dialogue meant business  
My brother spoke in declarations:

*Never step on anthills  
No one knows nothing  
Nothing is laid in stone  
Christ is most refined  
Fairy tales are fairy tales  
Some things are not real  
Don't get cute*

Then he would ask me  
What he told me

As I began a response  
He put up his finger  
A mere twelve years old  
Reminding  
*You fool*  
*You don't have to tell me*

*What I told you  
I already told you  
No one knows nothing*

He would smile & wink  
Rotating the story 180 degrees  
Or so its opposite  
Same as the smile  
Used in situations  
When the obvious is too evident

He said *this*  
Could not be learned  
Then of course  
He'd smile or wink  
Confirming  
*It can be learned*  
*Of course some people know things*

My head spun  
He like when he knew  
He made my head spin

But he wasn't mean  
He was working harder than me  
Ask Aunt Jill, uncle Joe  
I tried to get out of everything  
Science homework, math  
Early morning nothingness  
I only wanted to think about it  
Sit there & think

*Listen!*  
He yelled  
I drifted off  
Telling of my own story

*Stop!*  
*Where have you drifted?*

All I remember  
Is remembering to forget  
His words  
And mine

To be  
Not to be

The dilemma was here  
And to reach a for balance  
Measure, mean  
Nonsense by me  
We all must agree  
There is no end to this thing  
And without end is without balance?

What then is choice?  
I chose mine?  
Which turns out to be  
Both his & mine?

A convoluted story in fact  
The story of his and mine

Enough of going around  
And then around  
There is conclusion  
An outcome amid no end

*Wake up!*  
*That's enough!*  
He took my hand  
In his  
Which was rare  
For me  
For him  
To take my hand in his  
And say without hostility

*In your time of mortality*  
*You will be an artist*  
*It will be this way*

*What about you?*  
As if to shrug a compliment  
He gave me  
Off  
But tried to hide  
*What will you do?*  
*Your vision out-weighs mine*

He said nothing to this  
He didn't work like that  
What was said was said  
What was said he meant

These were his last words before closing our meeting  
Making for the door as dad called our names to dinner

And at the table  
He gave no indication to me or anyone else  
What we had talked about  
As if  
It was never said

For what was said  
My brother felt  
Because it had to be said  
Was somehow worse than being dead

## MOTHER'S QUESTION

She went by Birdie  
 A name with no history  
 A tree with no nest  
 A derivative of fiction

Brother Jack coined it  
 His job works that way  
 Fiction works that way  
 Made easy as the doer  
 Intimates the real  
 When in fact it's a lie

Did she teach me this?  
 I doubt it  
 She took the straight and narrow

After church she drove her black Buick to the symphony  
 Even if the winter light of that windless Sunday  
 Was gray and midwestern bleak  
 She went alone  
 My dad had no knowledge of Bruckner or Brahms  
 Nor did he want it

As long as I can remember  
 She was distant  
 Not her countenance or proximity  
 Her lack of understanding the infidel  
 Like the filthy wild animal  
 Like some very people I know

Instead, she was the believer  
 The incense, the redemption, the trinity  
 The little box of confession, the little beads of contrition  
 The yellow palms, the wine story, the baskets of silver fish  
 Nine yards in full

We talk not of fiction here  
 This mother's to write real about  
 Especially when you're considered *a filthy one*

In total it provided division  
 Something Mr. Polemic thrives upon



"How" my mother deliberated  
 "Did my own son turnout so filthy?"

Where did she go wrong?  
*How did he become an animal?*  
*Doesn't he like the mystery?*

The "hows" often haunted her  
 The self-criticism: *I've failed! My son's a heretic!*

As if to say my course is abominable  
 Division and difference  
 Are not indispensable  
 The hunt, the hated, Prospero, the avid capitalist, the first profit  
 The incentive and the insistence  
 Are they not essential?

Later came her thoughts of "why"

"Why is," I told her  
 "Is God's work  
 He made you make me this animal  
 Filthy at that  
 Suspended in disbelief"

I'd like the to think the division could be comical  
 Where else can you find a daydreaming deadman, Karl Marx  
 A good mother, Stalin, Hitler, MLK  
 All in the same century?

I've smelled the incense burn, prayed to a Virgin  
 Been vigilant on his Rising Day  
 And still, my confusion equals her passion  
 Could I say: *we cancel each other out?*

For me balance is in fact  
 Way out of whack

But did she really look straight up?  
 Into thin air? Into stars? Black sky?  
 Did she really know her son?  
 Am I gorged by disbelief?  
 Is Lucifer the Rhino and I the Stump?

She knew I liked theatre  
 I know I don't like it here  
 That's for sure  
 This is no theatre

I know what Shakespeare did  
 And this is no theatre  
 I know what Richard the Second realized  
*Ahhh, it's nothing*  
 That's theatre!

So pleased was cruel Richard  
 But he was a shade too late  
 He killed a lot of strangers along the way  
 He lost track of his play, his poem, his road, his home  
 Richard was eased off the rails into nothing  
 That's right – he finally came into the light  
 Just a shade too late

So why couldn't mother see I love the curtain above all cards?  
 All mortals oversignified and tragically lame?

I won't get sucked into life  
 Like the Lamb to the Lion  
 I'm bait – that's for sure  
 But not hers

No, not in those days  
 In those day she called to ask  
*Would you like to come for dinner?*  
 "Of course, mom, your cooking is delectable"

And so we sat happily together  
 Mother loving her wine  
 But as I commenced the dialogue  
 She began to raise her eyes  
*Who is this filthy animal of mine?*

## MOVEMENT

I trust this life  
With my luck  
And the fate  
The time and the tempo  
The meter and the draw  
The lilac and the lily  
The bitch and the snob  
And of course  
The hole in the door  
She comes through  
Onto you  
To love you  
For eternity evermore  
Like Catullus the Roman  
With kisses unbound  
Certain of the act  
Just by the sound  
A dying voice  
Going up and down

NO SYMPATHY

Jaco Pastorius  
And Christopher Marlowe  
Were both murdered outside a bar

They were both about thirty  
They were both about art  
They were both about death

One was a bass player  
That be Jaco  
One was a poet  
That be Christopher

One lived through the Renaissance  
That be Marlowe  
One lived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century  
That be Pastorius

One was stabbed to death  
As the London train was late  
That be the word man

The other was beaten to a pulp  
Barehanded by three men  
In Manhattan  
His instrument of no use

They were both the very best at what they did  
At least that is what they told them

And in the newspaper's report  
In each of the cases  
Their cause of death read

*Fierce Vanity*  
*Heated Dignity*  
*Unquestioned Clarity*

For that  
For them  
There is no sympathy

## MY LOVER, EMILY DICKINSON, AGREES

Evening pushes on  
Waves of the sea  
Creep to ashore

Windows a crack  
Hear the Atlantic  
A black phone rings  
I will not answer

I'd rather not  
Have to say  
I'm too lazy to record  
A message for you

I'm resting  
I'm alone

Yes, I'm resting  
I'm alone

You see I'm resting?  
Leave me alone!

Yet I'm not alone  
I'm not fooling anybody  
But the tradeoff is  
I'm gone

My lover, Emily Dickinson, agrees

## I KNOW WHY I'M HERE

Four farmers mingle in the midway  
 Eating their meat off a wooden stick  
 Man! That grease looks tasty!

Those sugared drinks are a country boy's delight  
 Cotton candy so fluffy pink tickles the little girl's nose  
 Tami walks in a sleazy halter with a grape snow cone

I ask  
 What am I doing here

As they shuffle under a faky blue light  
 August excitement swells with heat  
 Sweat rolling down off their temples  
 Not fully blocked by the baseball caps they wear  
 Hats not promoting the Giants or the Cubs  
 But farm machines & seed companies they love

That one, he's Gary, paper thin mustache  
 Reveals *John Deere* above the brim  
 That one *Pioneer Hybrid*  
 Old Kenny loves Dale Earnhardt  
 T-shirt & ball cap to boot

That one is quite fat  
 Topped in *Iowa Beef Steaks*  
 His ass is sweating like a river  
 Not to mention his wife Darlene  
 I mean Darlene  
 Who's bigger than  
 He is big  
 And he's big!

I won't admit seeing perspiration  
 Drench a thin vertical down the backside  
 Of her tight Levi's  
 But why so tight Darlene  
 There is no answer

So what am I doing here

The noise is continuous  
 It clamors steel whining & iron clamps grinding  
 The motion goes round-and-around  
 I watch the Ferris wheel turn 360 after 360  
 It never seems to stop  
 And I haven't even moved

When I do change direction  
 I spot a young girl holding a stuffed bear  
 Father leads *damn-proud-boy*  
 Knowing full-well he rung that bottle  
 Three in a row with a plastic red ring  
*We have a winner!*

His daughter's bright devotion  
 Was walking with the life-sized trophy

I ask a third time why I'm here

I drop to one knee  
 My camera is no use  
 It's much quicker than that  
 I feel some space ripple  
 And the sound of the sea  
 It's lonely when it stops  
 I want to come back  
 I can't take it for long  
 That being gone

The scene had changed  
 An old man with overalls  
 Makes a meandering waltz of confidence  
 Burning a rich tobacco  
 Blowing smoke I can smell  
 Right past my nose

I catch his attention  
 He winks a perfect *one one-thousand*  
 And the old farmer walks on

I don't ask anymore  
 I know why I'm here

## WHO I SAW IN HELL

(I)

First I spotted Marvin Bell  
 Though not here long  
 A true dead man he was  
 As well as a man of true words  
 Why then, I wondered, was he down here?

Next I saw Charles Darwin  
 The one and only *Six days of creation are a joke!*  
 He was vomiting severely  
 It was green mostly  
 He'd eaten hallucinogens allegedly

Of course Freud was visible  
 Still screaming his blasphemy  
 Strapped tight in a tub of ice  
 We all knew why he was here  
*Sex crazed freak!*  
*Unbelieving bastard!*

In the rear was Oscar Wilde  
 He was looking horrible  
 Syphilis was his and deathly thin he was  
 White where he was not the color of Darwin's puke  
 An expression of joy was nowhere found  
 This once handsome Irishman had gone down  
 – One too many times

Then I noticed Socrates  
 All trumped up with confidence  
 Stuffing legs of lamb into his big fat mouth  
 Listening to his listener  
 Like his listener was a dumbshit jackass  
 Smirking at every interjection  
 So for this Greek's infinite conviction  
 He was forced to hear *All Idiots At Once*  
 Without fail  
 And not for a day  
 Nor a week  
 Forever



Around the dark damp corner  
Was Senor Umberto Eco  
A raving Italian lunatic, pirate, womanizer, wordmaker  
He was sentenced to this dungeon  
On nine counts of malicious laughter  
As he hung upside down  
Licking a stick of fire  
The only thing known to cool that razor sharp tongue

Frank Conroy was also on the scene  
Drunk as always like a farmboy's bitch  
Playing pool as if to win  
But he only pretended to care  
Just to increase his wares  
And for this deception  
He was sent to hell block forty-one  
Where he joined good old John Donne

## TELL ME YOU ARE A WINNER

Yesterday a Scotch and soda tasted terrific  
Today it tastes awful

Tell me you are a winner

Last week the divine seemed plausible  
This afternoon it is ridiculous

Tell me you are a winner

In the sixties peace was cool  
At four p.m. war is cooler

Tell me you are a winner

Next Friday you'll fly to Las Vegas  
Tomorrow you'll ask yourself why

On Easter Sunday you played the pretty boy  
New Year's Day you're a jackass

Tell me you are a winner

At age sixteen your poetry was unmistakable  
At seventy the drivel is rolling

Tell me you are a winner

At twenty-five Shakespeare seemed trite  
On your deathbed you realize no one compares

Tell me you are a winner

## A REFRESHING DRINK WITH CEIL

Riding double on her Harley Triple Cat  
 Into the confines of the National Park  
 Stopping by the tracks  
 We trek down the slope to Horseshoe Lake  
 Watching a mother moose forage  
 In the shallows of the cold lake bottom  
 Her young calf lingering on the prehistoric edge  
 Of moss strewn firs

On the bank a hundred yards away  
 Slugging down bottles of Irish Stout  
 Sucking in plum tobacco  
 Matanuska gold

Noonday mosquitoes are swarming  
 Spinning balls by the dozens  
 One after the other in my face  
 I kill three in one swat to my thigh  
 They even bit at my ears  
 And that constant buzz!

All the while the moose and her baby  
 Are in no great hurry  
 They handle this condition

Is there one place they must be?  
 Are they already there?

The following day  
 Alone on a bench wedged into the steep hillside  
 I scan in the direction of Horseshoe Lake  
 This time a quarter mile across the river

I spot same moose and her calf  
 It must be  
 As they cautiously approach the swift Nenana  
 Intent upon that icy drink

Frightened and fragile  
 The calf lifts its head in my direction  
 I quickly think of Ceil  
 And wonder  
 Will she remember me?

## A TEMPTING FIND

This morning I found a gun  
 A handy little luger sport  
 Nine millimeters across the barrel  
 Inside a barn

Black and sleek in my palm  
 It shone in the noonday sun  
 I loaded the six chambers  
 Though it takes only one

The day soon sunk into night  
 I walked home thru barren fields  
 No tall yellow corn  
 No stars in the sky

*There is nothing more I can do  
 Nothing more I want to do*

I have seen the orange glow and black gun  
 Shine for the last time

I rocked in my rocker  
 Thought to my self  
 Where I might go  
 Believing only in the dust

The hungry dogs howled  
 Cats screeched  
 Birds stopped singing  
 A hot breeze filled my nose

I put the barrel into my mouth  
 Spoke a garbled *fuck you*  
 And waited

Waited more before pulling it out  
 Throwing it down  
 The gun skidding across the wooden planks  
 And somehow, someway  
 For some reason  
 Rocked on

## MAYBE THAT'S JUST ENOUGH

Certain times I believe  
 In a spirit, a gut feeling, a fixation of  
 The big image, omnipotence  
 A consciousness that pulls connections tight  
 Something in the sky, the air  
 A force setting the earth astride

I was in Matanuska  
 The green valley of Alaska

Walking alone on a desolate road  
 Round red-orange dropping dusk  
 The day had been spotless  
 Caribbean skies of blue  
 Sixty degrees north latitude  
 Seventeen below zero  
 Drinking in mountain air  
 Snowy white all the way around  
 My face numb and rubbery

There was no traffic this Christmas day  
 As I proceeded west at a languid pace

I didn't feel anxious  
 I felt a rare presence  
 And words dribbled out

*Maybe he did see the bush ablaze  
 Maybe it wasn't a sandbar he walked upon  
 A sandbar?  
 Maybe he did arrive on a white horse  
 Maybe it's true  
 True?  
 Not because I want it  
 Because it is*

I continued down the open road home  
 A feeling of acceptance stuck  
 Where upon sitting in my tiny cabin  
 A little bench and yellow lamplight  
 Russian novels to my right  
 Stoking the stove with birch logs  
 I said aloud

*That doesn't happen often  
Without a doubt  
I believe in possibility  
A myth not a myth  
But real history*

*Maybe that's good  
Maybe that's just enough*

## DEAD SQUIRREL

Can't stand the sight of road kill  
 Makes my stomach heave  
 Some think I'm a softy  
 Shouldn't a real man handle blood and guts  
 With ease?

I'd like to think it's about caring  
 Knowing full-well  
 What a shame such an accident caused

Flat dead squished from its hide  
 I must care  
 If I didn't  
 My stomach wouldn't heave  
 Would it?

The gold fur  
 Tar-stained  
 Sadness

It was this sorrow that got me reflecting

When I was a boy  
 I sang about a dead squirrel who came back to life  
 Played possum really  
 Just pretending he was finished  
 I couldn't handle the truth

It went like this:

*Dead squirrel on the side of the road  
 Dude picked him up and took him to the vet  
 Vet said he couldn't do anything about it  
 Threw him in the dungeon  
 Snuck out the back door and said  
 Boom! Boom!*

Wrote that as a boy  
 When I was about five  
 When I traveled far  
 With my big brothers, big sister  
 And parents  
 In a big old wagon

It cured the boredom and monotony of the road  
 The singing that is  
 The caring

## WHAT A LITTLE COKE CAN DO

Two kids on a summer's day  
Crying inside an old station wagon  
Outside the Safeway grocery store  
Oakland, California

They are cute as dolls  
But not fake

I get closer to see  
As they bawl their eyes out  
Stopping to say  
Through the slightly cracked window  
*You real men want some coke?*

They cease weeping  
One looks to the other  
I'm sure they're brothers

They resume with tears  
They don't trust me  
So I say again  
*Come on, guys*  
*Wouldn't you like a little coke?*

This time they brighten up  
Sending me to the source  
Delivering the coins  
Slapping the sign  
And not one  
But two  
Shiny red Cokes appear

I bring the sodas back  
To big brown eyes of disbelief

As for now  
The two of them have quit crying  
Inside an old wagon  
Outside the Safeway  
Oakland



## CHICAGO ART INSTITUTE

Atop the west facing steps at rush hour  
I admire a young couple with their small child

This baby amuses many  
Including its grandparents  
As it yawns and smiles in a little sailor's suit

There must be a private showing  
Since an 18<sup>th</sup> century marching band  
Clad in the festive color of British red  
Pipe and snare above their white knickers  
Black patent leathers

They form two lines of four facing one another  
As a trail of guests looking illustrious  
File between them in a well-timed musical procession  
Into the stone museum  
Now closed to an ordinary public

Guys like me and fifty or so others  
Who linger about on the outside

I wonder  
Is it the occasion when the elite views a Goya?  
The possibility of a Renoir?  
*Two Sisters Sitting on the Terrace?*  
A long landscape gaze on a big Turner?  
Or the naked modern photographs  
Hanging black-and-white on the walls of the basement?

Have you been inside this khaki colored building?  
Its façade of lion carvings?

In other directions  
An attractive woman of thirty-three stands column-side  
Born with the soft pale complexion of a Scandinavian  
Finely fitted in a pink blouse and navy slacks  
She snaps and clicks photographs of those lucky enough to enter

I've now persuaded myself to inquire  
Who these dignitaries might be

Maybe they are patrons  
True philanthropists  
Even artists themselves?

Though that quickly  
I've changed my mind again  
Not wanting to bother the pretty blond with the Nikon

Instead  
I make my way down the steps  
Getting a closer look at the baby boy  
Still being adored by all

## GHOST TALK

Combustion and fire exhausting words and thinking in the new direction of lyrical perfection a balance of stability taste and pleasure where contact is made not pulling or pushing the listener simply glowing in some strange invisible fashion without message without substance but not without hope and most certainly not without you.

## OSCEOLA

Midnight at the station  
 Nothing is around  
 Platform 1  
 Except the rare blowing wrapper  
 And a teenage couple  
 Getting all lovey-dovey  
 Curled together on hard cement

I am alone  
 The stationmaster is fast asleep  
 A big moon is low and alive  
 It is also amber  
 Like the overhead lights  
 Shedding fossil resin colors  
 From tall steel poles

A warm summer air  
 Is in perfect south breeze  
 I listen through a headset  
 Keeping all rhymes at ease

It's drama music  
 A kind of undone music  
 Music of the next  
 Music of no past  
*The let's try for a while*  
*To make it up as we go along*  
 Kind of music  
 I hear jazz

I see the moving lights  
 A bright one centered middle  
 It being most pronounced  
 Here comes *Crazy Horse*  
 Here comes the train

I look to the moon  
 Just shy of a billion stars  
 I look to the young couple  
 Snuggled into one brownish-yellow ball  
 I look back west to the approaching glow

It's now I realize  
 Without a doubt  
 Southern Iowa  
 America  
 Is a lovely place tonight

